

NATIVE PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE NORTHERN DISEASED BISON ISSUE:  
AN OUTLINE

A REPORT PRESENTED TO:  
THE NORTHERN DISEASED BISON  
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PANEL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
1. The Role of the Native Perspectives Report in the Panel Review Process .....	2
2. Introduction .....	3
3. Defining the Problem: The Perspective of the Diseased Bison Task Force Report .....	3
3.1 The Diseased Bison Task Force's Definition .....	3
3.2 Native People's Perspectives on This Definition of the Problem .....	4
3.2.1 Perspectives on the Incidence of the Diseases .....	4
3.2.2 Perspectives on the Issue of Genetic Integrity .....	5
3.2.3 Perspectives on the Issue of Possible Contact Between Bison of the WBNP Area and Herds of Cattle and/or Wood Bison .....	5
3.2.4 Perspectives on the Issue of the Threat to the Health of the Harvesters .....	6
3.2.5 Perspectives on Whether Disease Issues are Adequately Addressed By Focusing on the Hybrid Bison Herd .....	6
3.2.6 Perspectives on the Wood Bison Substitution Option .....	7
4. Re-defining the Problem: The Perspective of the Local Native Communities .....	9
5. Summary ... ..	12
References .....	12
Appendix A. Work Description .....	14
Appendix B. Schedule of Community Meetings .....	15

## 1. Role of the Native Perspectives Report in the Panel Review Process

The Northern Diseased Bison Environmental Assessment Panel was appointed in February 1989 to review the issues associated with a herd of diseased, hybrid bison inhabiting lands in and around Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP). The perception of the existence of this herd as a problem is outlined in the report of the Diseased Bison Task Force<sup>1</sup>, the members of which represent a number of provincial, territorial and federal government agencies. This Task Force report also defines a number of possible solutions and identifies the one which it feels best answers all government agency concerns: the replacement of the existing herd with a wood bison herd.

The task of the Panel is to "publicly review, in a sufficiently broad manner so as to include balanced local, regional and national perspectives, the environmental, resource conservation, socio-economic and health implications associated with the management options identified in the Task Force Report".<sup>2</sup>

The 'Issues Scoping' stage of the Panel review identified a number of critical areas on which the Panel requires more information. These gaps in information are being addressed in the Information Requirements stage, now coming to an end. Among the critical areas on which more information was required is the perspective of the Native communities on this issue, including the significance of the bison to the people and the perceived impact of the different proposed management options on the lives of Native people in the communities around WBNP.

My role is to assist in summarizing for the Panel these local Native concerns and perspectives as expressed in more informal discussions than was possible in the Issues Scoping process (Appendix A). This report is based on such discussions held with concerned individuals in each community (Appendix B); and on the responses to a draft of this report which was circulated to the communities involved. The lack of direct input from the Little Red River Tribal Administration arises from that group's decision not to participate in this process pending resolution of their negotiations for intervenor funding to hire their own consultants. These negotiations were concluded in time for Little Red River Tribal Administration to comment on the draft report. They feel that this report reflects, in general, much of their own position on this particular issue.<sup>3</sup>

The function of this report is to further the dialogue between the Panel and the Native communities<sup>4</sup>. It is intended to provide for the Panel a summary of specific concerns as well as contextual information necessary to interpret individual statements heard in community meetings. Equally so, refinements or enlargements on aspects of this report may serve Native groups as a useful point of departure for their own more specific proposals concerning the bison management issue.

## 2. Introduction

Local Native peoples have made it very clear that they have strong concerns about the bison and bison management; about the management option favoured by the Diseased Bison Task Force report; and even about the review process itself.

The statements summarized in this report primarily address the issue of how real is the problem as defined by the Diseased Bison Task Force and what is the real problem as defined by local Native people. The advantage in any debate goes to the party which initially defines the problem since subsequent discussion is often very much directed by that definition. The recognition by Native people of this 'edge' enjoyed by the Task Force report and its recommendations contributes to a perception of the Panel review as already biased.

The consistency of the critique offered by the different communities is quite striking and establishes a very strong position on this issue. One line of diversity emerging from these discussions is between those communities which are bison-harvesters and Park-users and those communities which are not. The latter's presentations are more restrained and members of these communities express a reluctance to see local concerns used to support solutions which would have the greatest impact on the communities abutting WBNP. Indeed, there is some scepticism about whether the consultation process is being used to manipulate them in just such a way.

The local Native critique is presented herein as a series of challenges to specific major points contained in the definition of the problem as provided by the Diseased Bison Task Force's report. The favoured option of substituting wood bison is also challenged. Lastly, the re-definition of the problem by the local communities is outlined in general terms.

## 3. Defining the Problem: The Perspective of the Diseased Bison Task Force Report

### 3.1 THE DISEASED BISON TASK FORCE REPORT'S DEFINITION

The problem as defined by the Diseased Bison Task Force report states that the bison of the WBNP area are:

1. diseased with tuberculosis (35.8%) and brucellosis (35.6%), posing a threat to the health of bison-users, other wildlife species and domestic cattle in the area. The latter threat has additional implications in that it interferes with Canada's credibility as a country with a brucellosis-free national cattle herd and with the national program to free these herds from tuberculosis by the end of 1989.

2. cross-bred wood bison and plains bison, the existence of which endangers the Wood Bison Recovery Program. This program is designed to promote the establishment and growth of wood bison populations to the point where this subspecies is no longer considered 'endangered' or 'threatened'. The program has more specifically defined a goal of re-introducing wood bison into its' historic range which includes the geographic area under discussion here. The hybrid herd now in the WBNP area is a threat to the genetic integrity of the wood bison herds.

### 3.2 NATIVE PEOPLES' PERSPECTIVES ON THIS DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

#### 3.2.1 Perspectives on the Incidence of Disease

Overwhelmingly, Native groups and individuals challenge the Task Force's statement that the bison of the WBNP area currently suffer such a high rate of disease.

The incongruity between the hunters' own observations in butchering bison and the conclusions offered by the Task Force leads the local people to question the biological data. People speculate that such figures are derived from samples which are too small or which do not involve a representative selection of age and sex groups. Whether this data reflects current disease rates is also questioned.

Some hunters attempt to estimate how many of the Slave River Lowland bison harvested over the past years were diseased and conclude that it was 10% or less. Others feel that the Hook Lake herd, in particular, is now disease-free. Tallcree representatives have no perception of the Wabasca herd ever having been diseased. Fort Chipewyan harvesters refer to the 1970 hunt where 200 bison were taken from different parts of southern WBNP. The attending veterinarian determined that six individuals (3%) were diseased.

Most of these comments appear to be directed towards tuberculosis specifically.

A recommendation to test the figures cited in the Task Force report on the incidence of disease is being discussed. Biologists would either accompany Native harvesters on special harvests in different areas of WBNP taking a large enough sample to be significant; or alternatively would examine live animals.

Although Native people recognize that any frequency of these diseases in the bison herds might be unacceptable to cattle ranchers, the strategy indicated in this discussed recommendation is informed by a perspective

which sees a certain incidence of disease in a population as natural and even inevitable.

### 3.2.2 Perspectives on the Issue of Genetic Integrity

Subspecies purity is not a valued concept to local Native peoples. The establishment of a wood bison population in itself is seen as a worthwhile endeavour but the slaughter of another bison population to make way for wood bison is seen as irrational. Why place a higher value on an animal which is, let's say, 90% wood bison, 10% plains bison than on an animal which is 90% plains bison, 10% wood bison?

From the harvester's point of view, the value of the two subspecies is seen as the same: "they both taste the same". Over and above this, Native people commented that this EuroCanadian cultural value on subspecies purity is actually a dangerous philosophy. Several people drew analogies to racism, an analogy which was offered with a smile but which is not facetious. Analogies between humans and animals are logical, given the aboriginal belief in the relatively equal standing of the different species, as we shall discuss later.

### 3.2.3 Perspectives on the Issue of Possible Contact between Bison of the WBNP Area and Herds of Cattle and/or Wood Bison.

Two routes of contact are discussed here: contact between wood bison in the MacKenzie Bison Sanctuary and hybrid bison in the WBNP area; and contact between WBNP area bison and cattle in the Fort Vermilion - High Level area and wood bison in the Hay-Zama area. Input from the Little Red River band is certainly needed on the frequency of bison moving out from the southwest area of the Park.

While no one argues that such migration is impossible, no one feels it is a major threat either. There is a certain amount of scepticism about the reported sightings of errant bison in the Fort Vermilion-High Level area and the possibility entertained that these individuals sighted actually come from the plains bison ranch at Fort Vermilion. Tallcree band members state that individuals from the Wabasca herd occasionally cross the river but feel that the lifespan of these bison is subsequently rather short. Representatives from Fort Providence think that an adequately monitored buffer zone between the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary and WBNP would be sufficient for the time being. The Dene Th'a report that they are unaware of any WBNP area bison penetrating their area but say that several bison were observed in 1983 or 1984 around the Hay-Zama Lakes. These were thought to be wood bison from the Nahanni Butte herd.



### 3.2.4 Perspectives on the Issue of the Threat to the Health of the Harvesters

Harvesters feel quite confident that the harvesting of diseased bison over the past decades has not proven injurious to their health. Butchering and cooking practices are credited with being sufficient to eliminate any risk. People comment on the times they've eaten meat from an animal with a tubercular lung or shoulder and experienced no health problems. As one Fort Resolution harvester said, "I'd rather eat meat from a buffalo with some tuberculosis than beef from cattle that is full of chemicals. The buffalo have been eating good, natural food, not fed with hormones and chemicals."

### 3.2.5 Perspectives on Whether Disease Issues are Adequately Addressed By Focusing on the Hybrid Bison Herd.

Native people are not convinced at all of the extremity of the problem as stated by the Task Force report, but if a potential problem does exist, they question whether a solution focusing solely on the bison herd will be at all effective. Their critique expands the scope of the problem to consider other sources of these diseases in the natural and social environment.

Native people are very much aware that disease operates within a system. One Hay River elder speaks of the bison as standing on a "floor", a "floor" shared by other species. Can disease organisms in the bodily wastes of infected bison contaminate soil and vegetation and be thus passed onto other bison? Several people suggested the use of prescribed burning to clean up meadows intensively used by diseased bison individuals. To what extent do other species harbour these diseases? What are the risks of disease transmission through predators and scavengers such as wolves and ravens which can travel long distances? These questions surfaced in the Issues Scoping stage and will surface again and again until people feel that enough is known about the maintenance and transmission of these diseases to make informed decisions.

There are also socio-economic aspects to this broadening of the scope of the problem, particularly to do with the transport of domesticated animals. Fort Providence representatives question that if the introduction of disease to the wood bison herds in the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary is the main concern, why are domesticated animals not tested prior to entering the Northwest Territories from Alberta.

In a similar vein but with reference to diseases in general, a Boyer River representative notes that band members are concerned about disease being transmitted to their cattle but they see the most immediate threat as, not the hybrid herds of the WBNP area, but the non-local cattle which are shipped into the Fort Vermilion grazing preserve. Cattle introduced from other geographic areas are seen as possibly introducing different strains of

disease and as a group in which disease transmission has been promoted by the crowded conditions of shipping or previous overstocking on southern pastures.

There is another source of disease about which certain individuals hypothesize: EuroCanadian management techniques themselves. There is much criticism of the bison management techniques practised in the past, particularly those that involved driving by helicopter, herding, corralling etc.<sup>5</sup> Managers themselves acknowledge that many of these techniques caused wounding and high mortality, particularly among calves. Some harvesters observe that harvested animals which prove to be diseased often bear some indication, eg. ear tag, that they have been vaccinated and/or handled in some way. They suggest that either the vaccination itself causes the disease or that the stress created in the animal by the handling makes it less resistant to infection.

The implications of the existence of other sources of these diseases are a major concern to people. What will government agencies do if a wood bison herd introduced to the WBNP area becomes infected through other sources? Disease is very difficult to control in wildlife population. Will all wildlife come to be regarded as a threat to domesticated animals?

### 3.2.6 Perspectives on the Wood Bison Substitution Option

People from the local Native communities all addressed the question of the hybrid slaughter and wood bison substitution option. Reaction varies from distaste and concern over such a strategy to downright rejection.

The ecological arguments against such a strategy include the point made above about the maintenance and transmission of these diseases in and through other components of the environment, including human practises of managing both wildlife and domesticated animals. Would slaughtering the WBNP area bison actually eradicate these diseases?

Bison harvesters and Park-users also feel that the implications of removing a major prey species from the ecosystem are potentially disastrous.

"If the buffalo only are killed, the wolves won't just move away. First, they'll clean out the country of all the wildlife - moose, woodland caribou and the small stuff too. There'll be nothing left here."

Can the impact of wolf predation on other prey such as moose and fur-bearing animals be mitigated by introducing a wolf control program at the



same time? This issue, raised at the Issues Scoping sessions, continues to be a major concern.

"Drastic problems require drastic solutions" may be a stirring motto to some but Native people refer to the fact that this alleged "drastic problem" was created by just such a philosophy operating in the past. The management decision taken in 1926 to transport diseased plains bison north started out as a 'drastic solution' to problems at the Wainwright game reserve. Not enough was known about the ramifications of the solution. The problems created have resulted in most of the subsequent bison management programs in WBNP, including this proposal. Native people are understandably reluctant to see this particular proposed solution engender several more generations of biological problems and management solutions to which they will be asked to adjust.

A final comment on this option derives from the religious or philosophical perspective of aboriginal peoples on wildlife and on the relationship between humans and other species. Although very little explicit discussion of religious/philosophical beliefs took place at these community meetings, it is clear that many statements made by community members are informed by a distinctive philosophical background.

However, it is beyond the scope of this report and, indeed, beyond my abilities, to provide any kind of comprehensive statement on this topic. A growing body of literature on this topic<sup>6</sup> may allow one to draw a general contrast between Native Canadian and EuroCanadian ideas about the relationship between humans and wildlife. One caveat is that such a general contrast does not do justice to the differences which exist between Native cultures themselves, as in, for instance, the philosophies of the Dene and the Cree.

The anthropologist, J. W. Bennett<sup>7</sup> observes that a society sees its' relationship with the natural environment operating on much the same terms as relations between its own members. An egalitarian society tends to see its relations with another species as a fairly equal one. Kinship, so important in the organization of social relations in an egalitarian society is often extended at least metaphorically to the natural world. On the other hand, a stratified society tends to see its relations with the environment as an unequal one with humans as the "upper class", so to speak.

The use of an analogy between humans and other species has thus more logical force in a culture that is traditionally egalitarian than it does in a socially stratified culture. This kind of analogy is employed in the comments on bison racism (3.2.2). Its use also leads, in the case of this issue, to speculations about how people with disease are viewed. If the bison could be destroyed because they are diseased, could people be destroyed too for the same reason? Are the Indians next?

Some harvesters use this logic to argue that, if the bison are so sick, they should be treated, just as when people are sick. Others argue that Nature would make the balance and that these processes should continue unhindered.

Other comments made by community members reflect the idea that harvested animals are owed respect. This is one aspect of the reciprocal relationship between harvesters and harvested. The idea that hunters could be on an equal footing with other species founders in EuroCanadian logic on the perception that the act of killing must always involve a denial of all rights to that which is killed. For many Native Canadian cultures, it appears that the essence of this equality lies in a relationship of mutual rights and obligations operating between the hunter and the hunted. Humans have the right to feed themselves and for many Native Canadian groups, the harvest is an event in which the animal is given to the hunter.

In return, the harvested animal still has rights. One of these rights is that of respect from the harvester. This respect is shown in part by the harvesters taking only the number of animals that they require for their comfortable survival. Native harvesters are concerned about the potential for wastage of meat from herds in remote areas of the Park under this option. Respect for the animal is also shown in the manner of killing. There is concern about the potential for causing distress to the animals in any slaughter that may involve, for instance, driving by helicopters.

Community members also point out that people have a responsibility to harvest animals to prevent either their outstripping the feed available to them or their becoming diseased. This idea clearly implies that the reciprocal relationship between humans and animals is worked out on a population level, a level beyond that of individual harvest events.

Finally, in more general cultural terms, involvement in hunting and trapping is an important part of Native life in the North. When solutions to perceived problems are proposed which have their main impact on the wildlife populations used by Native peoples, they see this as an attack on their own livelihoods, on their own lives. It has not escaped the notice of the harvesters that options to fence cattle or restrict the movement of cattle ranching towards the WBNP have not been discussed seriously.

#### **4. Re-defining the Problem: The Perspective of the Local Native Communities**

The major problem that Native people identify in bison management is the lack of local Native control over local bison resources.

The term, "wildlife management", may first bring to mind ideas about biological concepts and techniques, but it is also a political concept involving ideas about

"rights to resources and the means by which such rights are defined, transmitted, contested and enforced."<sup>8</sup>

The historical review of bison management presented in the Diseased Bison Task Force report is a review of a series of definitions of biological problems and the applications of technology to resolve them. This review doesn't reflect the political process whereby the Canadian state has taken away many local rights over the harvesting and management of bison. In 1894 a law forbidding the harvesting of northern bison was passed.<sup>9</sup> In 1899, Treaty 8 containing guarantees that the people would be able to hunt, fish and trap as they had always done was signed. Despite these assurances, the ban on harvesting bison continued and in 1922 in further violation of the Treaty agreement Wood Buffalo National Park was established. Today, elders emphasize the importance of the enduring agreement between the Treaty 8 nations and the Canadian state.

The harvest of the northern bison was first regulated by law due to concern over low bison population numbers. However, when the Wainwright herd was introduced and low bison populations were no longer a concern, the people were still not permitted to hunt bison. Today, harvesting bison in the Park is illegal but next year or the year after maybe all the Park bison will be killed to make way for the wood bison. Local people comment on the basic deceit in this situation and conclude that the goal of this management process, perhaps once one of conservation, now appears to be simply about control.

Local people assert that for their own economic and social stability, they need to have control over local resources. They cannot plan for the future if they are constantly in reaction to decisions and policies made by outside agencies. The state has committed itself to this principle. Aboriginal rights are to be translated into processes designed to sustain aboriginal communities and cultures. Aboriginal rights in wildlife, in particular, are to be translated into meaningful management roles.<sup>10</sup>

The local people's claim to a meaningful role in bison management is based on their traditional use and management of the bison. Despite interruption over the past century in the use and management by local people of bison, there exists locally a body of knowledge about the land and the bison. This body of knowledge, based on long experience, is a sufficient database from which to develop plans to manage bison for local needs.

Most of the Native communities involved in this debate have very definite ideas about how they would like to manage the bison available to them in their geographical area. For some communities, these local bison are wood bison; for others, they are hybrid bison. For some communities, the desired goal is the maintenance of subsistence hunting; for others it is a combination of subsistence hunting and more commercialized operations of outfitting or meat production. Some communities feel that a free roaming herd best meets their needs; others see a ranch operation as best meeting their needs. In the case of a herd and a

geographical area which are used by more than one community, compromises in the goals and strategies of management are recognized as necessary.

The communities have been working towards their goals since long before this review began and they will continue to work towards their goals long after the review is completed. Band leaders emphasize the need for long-range planning, not just for the next five years or ten years, but for the next generations. What does this issue and this environmental review mean to these efforts? Is this the beginning of another major thrust of agriculture in the North at the expense of wildlife and at the expense of economies based on wildlife? Is the panel review trying to sell us on a solution which has already been decided upon? To what extent might we have to compromise on this issue to achieve these goals? Is compromise on this issue the only way in which we will be able to achieve our goals? These are just some of the questions long-range planners for these communities ask themselves.

The Panel makes its final report in March of 1990, nearly one hundred years after the imposition of the law forbidding the hunting of the northern bison. Will this final report address this outstanding management issue?.

## 5. Summary

The intent of this preliminary report is to summarize Native concerns and perspectives about the proposals arising from the Diseased Bison Task Force's definition of the WBNP area bison as a problem.

The position of the Native communities states that:

- a) the problem as defined by the Task Force report is greatly overstated; and
- b) the real problem in bison management is the lack of Native control at the local level over local resources.

The critique developed by Native people of the Task Force's definition of the problem focuses on a number of specific points:

- a) the incidence of disease
- b) the validity of this approach to the genetic integrity issue
- c) the risk to the health of the harvesters
- d) the risk of contact between the WBNP area bison and other herds of cattle and/or wood bison
- e) the issue of whether the focus on the hybrid herd adequately addresses the problem and
- f) the feasibility of the wood bison substitution option.

The definition of lack of local control over local resources as the major problem in bison management is based upon a claim to superior knowledge about many aspects of local bison ecology as well as a claim to a political right based upon aboriginal rights and current economic needs.

### References Cited:

1. Bison Disease Task Force. 1988. Evaluation of Brucellosis and Tuberculosis in Bison in Northern Canada.
2. Federal Environmental Assessment Review Office. 1989. Northern Diseased Bison Environmental Panel. Operational Procedures. Page 1.
3. Jim Webb, personal communication, October 5, 1989. Mr. Jim Webb is the Tribal Administrator of the Little Red River Band.
4. This function is also served by the paper, "Diseased Bison in Wood Buffalo National Park. An Aboriginal Perspective" prepared for Fort Smith aboriginal groups by Martha Johnson, Research Director of the Dene Cultural Institute in co-operation with Dr. Fikret Berkes of the Department of Environmental Studies of Brock University. This paper focuses on the Fort Smith community alone but the main points it makes overlap markedly with the points presented in this

report. Since Johnson and Berkes's paper arrived as this report was on the point of being mailed, I have not attempted to integrate it other than through this footnote. The Dene Cultural Institute paper is available through the Panel Secretary.

5. eg. Laviolette, Frank nd. Needle Lake - Providence Wood Bison Transplant Report.
6. eg. Feit, H.A. 1986. James Bay Cree Indian Management and Moral Considerations of Fur-Bearers. In. Native People and Renewable Resource Management. the 1986 Symposium of the ALberta Society of Professional Biologists.
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7. Bennett, J.W. 1977. The Ecological Transition. NY: Pergamon Press.
8. Hunn, E.S. and Williams, N.M. 1982. "Introduction". In Williams, N.M. and Hunn, E.S.. Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers. AAS Symposium. #67. Colorado: Westview Press.
9. Statutes of Canada. Chapter 31, 57 - 58 VIC  
"Act for the preservation of game in the unorganized part of the North-west Territories of Canada."
10. DIAND (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development). 1981. In all Fairness: A Native Claims Policy. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.



## APPENDIX A

### Statement of Work

The contractor is to provide advice to the Northern Diseased Bison Environmental Assessment Panel and other participants in the Panel review on issues relating to the traditional role of bison in native culture in and around Wood Buffalo National Park. This advice is to be provided on an as required basis and need not be limited to the following:

1. Reviewing material supplied by the Panel on the Northern Diseased Bison review relating to native views and concerns.
2. Meeting with the Panel and Panel Secretariat to identify and discuss issues, identify information gaps and provide specialist insight into concerns relating to impacts on native communities from the short and long term manipulation of bison populations.
3. Meeting with review participants such as public interest groups, native organizations and government agencies as requested and approved by the Panel Secretariat, to provide specialized advice on and clarification of issues relating to general information requirements and bison importance to native people.
4. Attending public meeting and hearings held by the Panel.
5. Providing the Panel with a written public report on specific issues related to the importance of bison to native people.
6. Assisting the Panel with the preparation of its final report to Ministers.

**APPENDIX B****Schedule of Meetings  
with Community Representative**

- Aug. 8 Ron Loonskin, Councillor and Band Representative for Bison Management Issue.
- Aug 10 Jim Thom, Mike Thom, Bob Head, James Christie, Art Look, Michael Macleod representing between them the Dene Band, the Metis Association, the HTA and the Denendeh Conservation Board, Fort Providence.
- Aug. 16 Harvey Bulldog, Chief and Manager of Boyer River Farms, Boyer River Band.
- Aug. 31 Daniel Sonfrere, Elder, Group Trapping Area Leader, Hay River, NWT
- Sept. 1 Roy Fabien, Chief, Hay River Dene Band.
- Sept. 4 Frank Laviolette, Elder and Bison Harvester, Park-user, and David King, Elder, Fort Smith.
- Sept. 5 Henry Beaver, Chief of Fort Smith Band, Raymond Beaver, Band Member, Frank Laviolette, Ken Hudson, President, HTA, Fort Smith
- Sept. 6 Chief Sayine, Council and interested observers, Fort Resolution.
- Sept. 11 Harvey Denechoan, Hay Zama Wood Bison Project, Dene Th'a Tribal Administration (Phone conversation).
- Sept. 13 Sonny Flett (WBNP Wildlife Advisory Board, Metis Association), Archie Waquan (Park Harvester), Fort Chipewyan.
- Sept. 14 Matthew Lepine (Cree Band Chief) Edward Lepine (Cree Band Councillor). Andrew Campbell (Park-user; Bison-harvester), Pat Marcel (Chief of Chipewyan Band), all above in Fort Chipewyan.